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Human resources management

Measures taken to address systemic human resources issues raised by the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report provides responses to systemic issues identified in the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services (A/64/314). The issues addressed include: (a) career progression and development (performance management, recruitment and selection, official status files and contract management); and (b) leadership and managerial effectiveness (abuse of power, investigatory processes for alleged misconduct, academic qualifications, maternity leave, staff referral for medical evaluation, coverage for trauma and post-crisis care).

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I. Introduction

1. Pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 64/233 and 63/253, the Office of Human Resources Management submits the present report addressing the issues identified in the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services (A/64/314).

II. Systemic issues identified in the Secretariat

A. Career progression and development

1. Performance management

Issues identified

2. Timely and quality performance management and reports should be key indicators of managerial effectiveness. It is important that management have a process to monitor and review the application of the performance management system. In the funds and programmes in particular, it is recommended that committees reviewing evaluations, especially at the country level, strive for neutrality.

3. The Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services recommends that the staff performance appraisal system component of this initiative be further strengthened by placing added focus on quality of performance evaluation and feedback, in addition to compliance with the completion of the process.

Measures taken

4. Within the context of General Assembly resolution 63/250, and to address systemic issues within the Organization's performance management system, the Staff-Management Coordination Committee made the following recommendations at its thirtieth session in June 2009: to consider a possible 180/360 degree feedback mechanism, including a pilot approach; to evaluate a new rating system; to implement the performance management module of the new talent management tool, Inspira, by November 2009; to develop a strategy for mandatory performance management training for supervisors and managers; to strengthen the role of the Management Review Committee and the Joint Monitoring Committee; and to explore creative ways to reward, recognize and motivate staff and strengthen remedies for addressing underperformance.

5. The Organization has used the Committee's recommendations as a framework to address the General Assembly's concerns and has taken measures to progressively improve compliance and accountability by issuing a new administrative instruction, replacing the electronic tool supporting performance management, implementing mandatory training for managers and supervisors on performance management and shifting the system from one that focuses on compliance to one that focuses on development. The enhanced system includes the following components:

(a) A stronger focus on all dimensions of performance management, not just appraisal or compliance;

(b) Stronger links between performance management and career development and learning, development of competencies, career aspirations and the maintenance of a positive work environment through ongoing dialogue and feedback;

(c) A simplified, more clearly defined rating scale;

(d) Improved clarity with respect to the roles of stakeholders, including staff members, managers, heads of departments, offices, missions and the Organization as a whole, strengthening the link between performance and accountability;

(e) Strengthened linkage between individual plans and other mechanisms in the accountability framework, including compacts, departmental workplans and budget fascicles, to more clearly understand how an individual's work contributes to the overall mandates of the Organization;

(f) Strengthening of the roles of the Management Review Committee and the Joint Monitoring Committee, introduced through a new policy that changes their role from one of compliance monitoring to one of advising on human resources strategy, with an emphasis on career and staff development. These new roles will ensure the re-establishment of such bodies in all offices and departments, which was the initial concern of the Staff-Management Coordination Committee working group;

(g) A more streamlined rebuttal process, including the establishment of timelines;

(h) Clearer guidance on addressing underperformance;

(i) Strengthened roles, responsibility and accountability of the senior management team of each department, office and mission mandating active engagement and leadership in supporting accountability for performance at all levels by:

(i) Ensuring that linkages are established between individual workplans and departmental strategic frameworks, programme budgets and compacts of departmental heads;

(ii) Promoting a culture of high performance, personal development and continuous learning through learning and development initiatives;

(iii) Promoting mandatory performance training for all managers and a minimum target of five days of professional development per year for all staff in accordance with the learning and development policy (ST/SGB/2009/9);

(iv) Promoting a positive work environment, ensuring ongoing feedback, motivation and recognition, the implementation of measures to reward and recognize staff, and the strengthening of remedies to address underperformance.

2. Recruitment and selection

Issues identified

6. Regarding field positions, the Office proposes that the Department of Field Support undertake a comprehensive review of the processes for initial and technical clearance and requests for movement of field positions to a higher level in order to identify possible bottlenecks and to find ways to shorten those processes.

7. The Office further recommends that a procedure or mechanism be put in place to advise managers on additional candidates to be interviewed at the outset of the process rather than after the interviews have been concluded and the cases submitted to the central review bodies for consideration.

Measures taken

8. Since the publication of the Secretary-General's report, the new talent management concept has been implemented, including several measures that have been carried out in the recruitment and selection process in the field.

9. The establishment of the field central review bodies, which now form an integral part of the recruitment process, ensures fairness and transparency by monitoring adherence to applicable guidelines and established procedures. Where necessary, additional clarifications are sought from managers (which initially had an adverse impact on the time taken to finalize approval by the field central review bodies). To assist in the process, the Field Personnel Division has been providing missions with comprehensive guidance and training on how to ensure that cases are in full compliance with applicable procedures, prior to their submission to the field central review bodies, thus reducing turnaround time.

10. In addition, the Field Personnel Division has completely centralized its staffing and workforce planning processes (utilizing occupational group managers and expert panels and rosters, all managed by the Division), thus enabling the Organization to forecast and plan for the timely recruitment of selected candidates. All other key staffing processes such as selection and on-boarding will also be streamlined, contributing to a rapid deployment of selected candidates. The Inspira talent management tool is gradually being rolled out to field missions, and the new streamlined process is being implemented.

11. Field missions that have been granted recruitment authority by the Department of Field Support are now able to undertake the full recruitment, selection and appointment exercise; past experience shows that this helps to eliminate bottlenecks and shorten the length of the recruitment process.

12. The promulgation of administrative instruction ST/AI/2010/3 on the staff selection system has integrated and unified the staff selection process applicable to both field and Headquarters staff. Under the new selection system, the initial and technical clearance processes and requests for movement of field positions to a higher level will no longer apply to the selection process, thus bringing the system into alignment with the new streamlined procedures. Under the new system, candidates will be notified of their status in the selection process and of the results of the various reviews.

13. Since 2007, 1,398 cases of movement of field positions to a higher level have been recorded. In August 2008, the Department of Management delegated authority to the Field Personnel Division to process such cases. While there may have been instances of delay prior that date, for the most part the Division has reviewed and approved the cases in an expeditious manner.

3. Official status files

Issues identified

14. To resolve the problem of accessibility and transparency, the Organization could look into best practices in other organizations and make efforts to identify where bottlenecks exist and how to streamline the system. The option of keeping official status files electronically could also be explored.

Measures taken

15. The Personnel Records Unit in the Office of Human Resources Management is responsible for the creation, maintenance and security of the official status files in order to address two major operational concerns, namely, the confidentiality of the information contained in the files and ease of access to those files. The content of the documents in the official status files is the responsibility of the Office. Staff members may access their official status files by making an appointment over the telephone or by using e-mail. At Headquarters, all requests by staff members to review their official status file are confirmed in less than 24 hours.

16. Processes are continually reviewed and refined to streamline access by staff and the Office of Human Resources Management to official status files. The Office is reviewing best practices of other organizations of the United Nations system, with a view to introducing good practices, where applicable. It has also identified potential bottlenecks and how to streamline the system through a review using the "Lean Six Sigma" business management strategy.

17. The option of keeping official status files electronically is being explored. In the last 15 years, there have been several attempts to consider options in digitizing the official status files, all of which have proven inconclusive. Furthermore, all efforts to carry out a full digitization exercise have been hindered by lack of funding.

4. Contract management

Issues identified

18. The Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services recommends that management review the ways in which contracts are managed in order to ensure that the highest ethical employment standards are met.

Measures taken

19. The General Assembly has clearly indicated that there is no expectancy, legal or otherwise, of renewal of a fixed-term appointment. This was confirmed by the United Nations Administrative Tribunal. Good performance and conduct therefore do not ensure that a contract will automatically be renewed.

B. Leadership and managerial effectiveness: abuse of power

Issues identified

20. It is important that managers be selected and recognized not only for their ability to deliver programmatically but also for their ability to create an organizational culture that does not tolerate harassment, discrimination or abuse by the management or others.

21. It is important that candidates for positions with supervisory responsibilities be selected for and appraised on the quality of their management skills, as well as their technical and other abilities.

Measures taken

22. The question of leadership and managerial effectiveness, including abuse of power and investigating processes for alleged misconduct, is being reviewed, particularly in light of the jurisprudence emanating from the United Nations Dispute Tribunal and the United Nations Appeals Tribunal. In addition, Secretary-General's bulletin ST/SGB/2008/5, which deals with the prohibition of discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority, is being reviewed to address some of the concerns raised.

C. Investigatory processes for alleged misconduct

Issues identified

23. Streamlining the processes for the review and investigation of alleged misconduct will improve their effectiveness. In addition, reviewing all formally lodged complaints and providing feedback to the complainant will help to ensure the transparency and effectiveness of the process. In cases where the complainant fails to establish a prima facie case of wrongdoing, such determination needs to be on record to show that the complaint was examined and the alleged perpetrator exonerated. A centralized database containing such records could be used to identify reported abuse. Close monitoring of the contractual situation and performance appraisal of the complainant would help to protect him or her against retaliation during or after investigation.

Measures taken

24. As indicated in paragraph 22 above, the subject of investigating processes for alleged misconduct is under review.

D. Academic qualifications

Issues identified

25. A comprehensive system-wide policy on the subject of academic qualifications is required in order to communicate to potential staff whether their degrees are accredited. The policy should also outline the implications of non-compliance with established requirements. In addition, better coordination of the selection and recruitment processes, from screening through to the issuance of a letter of appointment or contract, would streamline the work of the Office of Human Resources Management in this regard.

26. In the report of the Secretary-General, the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services also recommended that a database of accredited institutions be developed, using best practices and following system-wide consultations, to be used as a reference tool by all relevant entities involved in selection and recruitment processes.

Actions taken

27. The Office of Human Resources Management acknowledges that in a small percentage of cases, it has determined, upon investigation, not to recognize the degrees of certain staff members. The Organization's long-standing policy has been to base its recognition of degrees on the accreditation of specific institutions by national authorities, namely the ministries of education or similar bodies in each country. That is, degrees from bodies not recognized as university-level institutions by their national Governments are not recognized by the United Nations.

28. The Office of Human Resources Management takes full advantage of the resources available on the Internet to research institutions and confirm the accreditation of distance-learning programmes. Many of the degrees acquired online are accepted by both national authorities and the United Nations. Programmes that grant significant academic credit for work experience and lack adequate measurement of academic standards and a complete curriculum are generally not recognized by national authorities.

29. Prospective candidates for employment sometimes provide incomplete or incorrect information on their applications. With the introduction of Inspira in April 2010, this issue has been addressed: the Inspira tool requires more precise details regarding the candidate's educational qualifications.

30. Since 2008, OHRM has maintained a database of recognized institutions and has kept abreast of the lists of fraudulent institutions provided by various organizations. Owing to resource constraints, it conducts research only when required for the recruitment of individual staff, under its delegation, within the Secretariat. The Office provides its policy on recognition to staff, other offices and United Nations common system organizations when requested and confirms recognition of specific institutions as required.

31. The Office of Human Resources Management reiterates that, given the small number of cases of unrecognized degrees, it cannot provide the staff and resources to support a technical platform for the entire United Nations common system as envisaged by the Office of the United Nations Ombudsman, unless mandated to do so by the General Assembly.

E. Maternity leave

Issues identified

32. The periodic circulation of relevant policies to managers, which could be monitored by gender focal points, would help to ensure equal opportunity for career development for female staff.

Measures taken

33. Maternity leave provisions are included in the Staff Regulations and Rules and are shared with all staff members, including managers, on a regular basis.

F. Staff referral for medical evaluation

Issues identified

34. It is important to establish and circulate appropriate guidelines on how to determine when psychological evaluation is appropriate and if so, how to proceed. In addition, supervisors and managers should be given adequate information and training on how to deal with potential trauma and mental health issues within the framework of the Staff Regulations and Rules.

Measures taken

35. The United Nations Medical Services Division does not accept requests by supervisors for psychological evaluation of staff members without their knowledge. If such a request is received, a representative of the Staff Counsellor's office investigates the situation to determine an appropriate course of action. If necessary, supervisors are coached on how to engage with staff members perceived to be in need and how to encourage the staff member to seek assistance. The Staff Counsellor's office is always available to provide support to all parties, including by mediating workplace conflict situations, or implementing a range of psychosocial support strategies.

36. The Staff Counsellor's office has developed a training programme entitled "Stress management and self-care after trauma: strategies for managers", which proved particularly useful to managers at the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti in dealing with staff members who had been traumatized. The programme is currently being provided to managers as part of their pre-deployment mission readiness training.

G. Coverage for trauma and post-crisis care

Issues identified

37. The Ombudsman strongly urged that more attention be paid to the subject of coverage for trauma and post-crisis care and recommended that the Organization create a mechanism to address the post-crisis and long-term needs of survivors and the family members of deceased staff. The Ombudsman had previously identified the need for care or coverage for staff who sustain psychological or mental illnesses resulting from service-related incidents (see A/62/311).

38. The Office of the United Nations Ombudsman and Mediation Services supports the recommendation of the Working Group on Staff Humanitarian Affairs to establish a dedicated unit within the Organization to provide both operational and policy support for survivors and family members of deceased staff members.

Actions taken

39. Following the recommendations of the Working Group on Staff Humanitarian Affairs, the Secretary-General developed a proposal to establish dedicated capacity within the Office of Human Resources Management for addressing the needs of victims and survivors of malicious acts and natural disasters. In response, the General Assembly approved five posts and additional non-post resources, as part of the 2010-2011 regular budget allocation, to establish an Emergency Preparedness and Support Team. The team is comprised of a Team Leader, a Policy Officer, an

Associate Administration Officer, a Senior Medical Officer and an Administrative and Information Technology assistant. Revised planning tools and templates will be developed to enable duty stations to develop risk-based emergency medical preparedness plans, and to monitor and support duty stations in developing, evaluating and testing their emergency medical preparedness and mass casualty response plans. Working in coordination with the United Nations Medical Directors working group, a working body of the High-level Committee on Management, the Medical Services Division will ensure availability of trained United Nations medical response teams for deployment to areas where there have been incidents of mass casualties, thus ensuring administrative support for deployed teams, the coordination and monitoring of immediate and long-term medical care for victims assistance and advice on medical evacuations and access to medical care.

40. Part of the newly created team's mandate is to deal with the non-medical elements of victim support. One of the team's important tasks to date has been to support the families and staff affected by the earthquake in Haiti, in which the United Nations lost 101 staff members. From January to May 2010, this work was handled by the Organization's first family support units in Santo Domingo and Port-au-Prince and by a dedicated team of family focal points working from New York. The family support unit is an on-site centre for logistical and administrative support during an emergency, while the family focal points are volunteer staff who provide both psychosocial support and administrative guidance regarding benefits and entitlements to survivors and/or families immediately following a crisis. Ideally, each family focal point is supported by a human resources specialist, who provides in-depth information on benefits and entitlements as well as overall support to families and injured staff members. The family support team is designing a long-term tracking tool to assist United Nations system organizations in following up with injured staff.

41. Since the earthquake, the team has been working with the Department of Field Support to ensure that survivors and family members of deceased staff are receiving their benefits and entitlements, as well as to review lessons learned and best practices. Looking forward to the preparation of Headquarters and duty stations for emergencies, main activities will include the building of internal capacity through the training of a cadre of staff to serve as peer helpers on site in different regions of the world and to become members of future family support units and family focal points. The training programme will be run as a pilot at several peacekeeping missions, with a view to expanding it to all United Nations duty stations, including field missions. The team is designing an e-tool to help all parties to communicate efficiently during emergencies and to assist call centre volunteers.

42. The team is also working on materials to enrich its response by reaching out to vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly, persons disabled in emergencies, families of hostages and national staff in need of shelter.

43. The team is collaborating with the agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system both at Headquarters and in the field, as well as best practice non-governmental organizations and commercial companies that offer similar family support programmes. It has also joined a new coalition for improving organizational resilience and works closely with Headquarters units such as the Business Continuity Management Unit and the Department of Safety and Security. They will focus on creating structures and programmes to enable United Nations staff to be as effective as possible in the event of an emergency that might cripple operations.